

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# An Unexpected Encounter with a Mentor

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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In a previous blog, I described how the art form and interpretation of the Bach fugue by 20<sup>th</sup> century pianist, Glenn Gould, shaped the fluency of my operative technique during my early career as a large animal surgeon.<sup>1</sup> While serving as veterinary dean at Cornell later in my career, I adopted the fugal form as the defining organizational structure for chairs of our academic departments, referring to it as *contrapuntal management*.<sup>2</sup>

Though Gould died three decades ago, the impact of his interpretation of Bach had a profound impact on me as a surgeon and administrator. That influence continues even now in my return to the classroom as a teacher working in small tutorial groups.

Three weeks ago, while waiting at the gate at O'Hare for a flight to Des Moines, I had a chance encounter with another person who has had a major influence on my work. George Will, the Pulitzer-Prize winning columnist, author and political philosopher was awaiting the same flight. Though I am not one to engage luminaries just because they occupy the same air space, my reaction to seeing Will was spontaneous and immediate: I wanted to meet him.



*George Will, columnist, author, political philosopher*

Photo by the author, 2014

I have been reading assiduously Will's works for years. What I consider to be a scholarly approach to articulating his views on the political, social and cultural news of the day is what initially drew me to him. The form of his arguments, while concise and clear in their own right, are also draped in a multi-colored fabric of words complex enough to command attention.

During the 1980s, I became so fond of his work that I even held a subscription to *Newsweek* just to have access to his biweekly columns. More recently, I read his column in the *Washington Post* and watch him as regularly as I am able, alongside Mara Liasson, Charles Krauthammer and others, on *Special Report w/ Bret Baier*.<sup>3</sup>

During the last couple of years, the columns I share in this blog and my occasionally-invited lectures have become more firmly rooted in the historic underpinnings of veterinary medicine and One Health. And whether it's by deliberate design or simply by osmosis from people I admire, I have occasionally found myself using the format so often evident in Will's columns or commentary, in which he frequently presents his thesis in an historical context.

In this age where the prominence of mentor-guided development is considered a *sine qua non* for professional advancement, it begs the question: can we be mentored by someone whom we have never encountered personally, nor only met in passing? More on that in a future column.

As I approached George Will that recent afternoon in Chicago, I just wanted to tell him, "I'm a fan." I didn't expect him, busily engaged in multiple telephone conversations, to take more than a passing interest in me.

Instead, he gave me an uninterrupted window of his time, and for a few precious moments, I felt genuinely in his sphere. He thanked me graciously, and after inquiring whom I was, shared with me his own substantive connection to Cornell that dated to his childhood.

That was it! George Will continued with his calls and his reading, but I shall always remember the kindness afforded to me in this brief, but prodigious encounter. And it will make me a more committed mentor in my own sphere of influence.

In my presentation on mentoring the following afternoon to veterinary students at Iowa State University, we discussed how to identify and reach out to mentors. Can a student engage a busy veterinary expert either at her home institution, or in another city or state?

Yes, they can! Accomplished veterinarians from all sectors of the profession often feel it not simply their duty, but also their privilege to engage students in sharing their life experiences. Whether it's third-year Cornell student Becky Donnelly meeting Dr. Valerie Ragan,<sup>4</sup> the director for the Center of Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine at Virginia-Maryland CVM, or second-year student Aziza Glass interviewing four-times-in-space veterinarian Rick Linnehan by cell phone,<sup>5</sup> mentors are far more accessible than many students realize. Sometimes all we have to do is be confident, assertive, and accept that we may be pleasantly surprised.

Surprised, even changed, sometimes for life.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. Learning Surgery from a Classical Pianist. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Feb 27, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Donald F. What Glenn Gould Taught me about Leadership. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, April 18, 2014

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Donnelly, Rebecca, Class Assignment with Impact: An Interview with Valerie Ragan. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, May 28, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Glass, Aziza, A Veterinary Student Interviews a Veterinary Astronaut. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, April 28, 2014

KEYWORDS:

Glenn Gould  
George Will  
Mentoring  
Rebecca Donnelly  
Aziza Glass  
Rick Linnehan  
Valerie Ragan

TOPIC:

Mentors

LEADING QUESTIONS:

Imagine the surprise and joy of meeting a mentor unexpectedly.

META-SUMMARY:

The author has an unexpected encounter with a mentor whom he had previously never met.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

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*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.